

## **Back Again, Back Again: Change of Plans**

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode twelve: change of plans.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** We'd burned the castle, Iolo and I. The execution-to-come was nevertheless being held amid the wreckage. We left, gathering horses and supplies and weapons from the villages we crossed through on the way. I walked beside Callia and Haast, and Iolo walked beside me, keeping up a steady stream of conversation that kept worry from setting in too fiercely. Her anxiety betrayed her, though- over and over in her hands as she walked, she flipped and caught and flipped and caught that star-carved dagger.

At the halfway mark, Callia turned to address those that had come along. *Tonight we* - she began, and finished the sentence

with an odd word, one that I didn't recognize. This was happening less and less, my ears stumbling over Rhysean and losing meanings, but it still happened. At my odd look, Silas, from beside Roena and a brown-haired boy called Tamas, caught the strange word and grinned. She mouthed back at me the simpler Rhysean word for the involved one Callia had chosen - *dividam* - meaning, *to separate*.

I mouthed *gratinoc* to her and tried to tune back into Callia's speech.

*Tomorrow evening the poet Leander Feldrea is set to be murdered. We will wait until all have gathered and the kings bring them out, and then we will take our chance.*

They were planning on causing a riot, or something close. We were separating tonight not just for anonymity's sake, but to go to each and every enclave of supporters we had and convince them to come to the steps of the ruined castle. We couldn't imagine that anyone was particularly thrilled to see a bard killed on such ridiculous charges - not when, in Rhysea they were something almost akin to sacred. They were artists and storytellers, of course, but historians, too - everything this country had been was caught in their histories, and to silence a poet was to silence your past. It was why patronage traditions and bardic bar culture were so strong. It was why Rhia, who, though she was a historian and not a bard, could nevertheless

sing days worth of epic poetry. History and music and history and storytelling were intrinsically connected, and among the common people, at least, the three were prized above almost all else. It was bad luck to turn a bard away when they came to your door. It was worse luck, we all had to figure, to kill one.

At least. That's what we were planning to capitalize on. Put enough *fretim* and their sympathizers among the crowd to drum up discontent in everyone else, then use the chaos to steal Leander away and prove the monarchy's fractures in the same instant.

This was a wonderful plan in theory. The only problem was its amount of *if's*. *If* Leander wasn't under such heavy guard that we couldn't reach them. *If* we were able to raise enough chaos in time. *If* none of us with our faces on wanted posters were caught and killed beside them.

*If*, said the last little insidious part of my brain, *this isn't already a giant trap and going is equivalent to stepping onto a funeral pyre*. After all, this was a summons widely announced at almost the same time as those same wanted posters had reached us. The one with my face on it was not a condemnation as much as it was a plea. *Come back*. Were we really all stupid enough to believe that this *wasn't* an elaborate set-up to trap me and kill the people I'd run away with?

Maybe Rhia was right. *This is how they'll kill us all.* Would the chaos we were hoping to raise really be enough to stop all our deaths, if so?

As we continued, groups started to break off. Silas squeezed my hand and smiled before cutting off with Roena and Tamas. We both raised our arms, same time, *shoulder-shoulder-out-cross*, and laughed at the simultaneous plea for good luck.

Soon, it was Callia, Iolo, and I, and the last-ditch attempt that had been sitting in the back of my mind bubbled up.

*Callia*, I began, hesitantly. *What if - what if this does not work?*

She grinned in a way that did not show her teeth. *Have faith, Eligidida. We have beaten you before.* Callia used the Rhysean pronoun, *nocim*, the one that meant we-not-you. The one that still put me on the side of the kings. She knew where this conversation was headed.

*You are too smart to walk towards a trap, Callia. There is an English word - "honeypot" -*

*Don't condescend*, she snapped. *Speak Rhysean. I know you are trying to convince me something, so do not do it in the language of killers and kings.*

I floundered for a moment before trying again. *You promised me one chance, to try and turn Cass- the prince. I know that, should everything go to plan, we would not face him tomorrow,*

*and you did not expect my end of the bargain to come due so soon. But - I worry. And I want this to succeed. So - give me tonight. Let me find the prince, talk to him, and try to save Leander before tomorrow. If tomorrow is a trap, friends will die. You said I have the least to risk. That means I have the most to - I didn't know the Rhysean word or equivalent for "leverage," and I wasn't going to make the mistake of sliding into English. I can help, I finished, lamely. Let me find him.*

*No, Callia snapped. Absolutely not. Shut up.*

*Have faith in me for a second, I nearly shouted. It was messier Rhysean than that. You already know this, listener. This whole conversation, every word I spoke, was a study in minced words and missed intentions. Do me the favor of pretending me more eloquent than I was. You told me to kill him or turn him. When else will I ever easily get close enough, if this is possibly the last chance we'll ever have before he truly hates me?*

*I don't trust -*

*Trust, I bit out. Trust. I trusted in you, both of you, when I left. I trust in you, all of you, every, every day. The least you could give me is - I struggled, reaching for the English phrase the benefit of the doubt and finding nothing even close to suitable in my vocabulary. I would like - I would like trust in return. A little bit.*

Callia stared at me, dumbstruck. *You have killed my friends. You claim to come from another world. You claim a prophecy repurposed by kings and you have used it as a reason to lord over us all. You ask for my trust?*

*Give what she asks,* Iolo said. Her eyes were steady, locked onto mind. *They said, be true to your word, eligidida. Do not betray me in this leap of faith.* She didn't even look at Callia as she said, *Give to her a little bit of trust. I believe her. I will supply the rest.*

*Gratinoc,* I said. To Callia - *pers. Please. Trust me tonight. Give me until sunrise.*

She hesitated, lower jaw thrust out in that way I knew meant she wanted to scream. *How do I know,* she said, voice thick with - something, something dark I couldn't tell - *that you will not run to him and betray us all?*

I tamped down on the nice little mix of anger and frustration that flared hot in my chest and threatened to come out my mouth in virulence and regret. *If it had been my choice, Leander would have been our poet. Cassian's and mine. They are like me. They are like you* - I said, and powered through even as she rolled her eyes. *If they are to be killed, it is because Io - the king's poet - is afraid and so wills it. It is because the prince thinks that this is the way to find me. Let him think that he is winning. Let me use my advantage here.*

For a long, long moment, she stared. Finally, she said, *give me your sword.*

I balked. *What?*

*I have heard the stories, eligidida, she grinned. How you will not go without it. How your head swims when it is not around. If you plan to come back, leave it with me, and reunited you will soon be. Her grin curled, and curled, became sly. Do not worry. We both know that I can hold it, no?*

I recognized the yes to my proposition that this question hid. I did not waste my breath on bluster or bargaining. I unhooked my sheath from my belt and held it out to her. *I would like one in return. So he is not suspicious. Cass- the prince knows the stories, too.*

I took Iolo's. Iolo took Callia's two short swords. And Callia, with a nod of satisfaction, hooked mine to her own belt. She pulled it from its sheath. We all pretended not to notice as it began, just the tiniest bit, to glow. *I hope you have a plan, eligida.*

*I do, I said. I just - I need the both of you, then. And a few more. Silas, maybe. And her friends. Are they nearby?*

Iolo nodded. *I know where they are. What are you thinking?*

I turned to Callia. *Here are my thoughts. Here is my plan.*

I laid it out, then. All that I believed. Callia pulled it apart, picking at every single *maybe*, until she was as close to sated as she could be.

*Go, then, Eligida. Here is my trust. If all is well, I will see you soon.*

I nodded, meeting first Iolo's eyes, then Callia's, and turned to kill a prince or save a friend.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at [patreon.com/backagainpodcast](https://patreon.com/backagainpodcast), where you'll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for



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I hope you have a wonderful day.